CHAPTER FOUR

TIME FRAMES.

SO! LET'S SEE: EACH PANEL OF A COMIC SHOWS A *SINGLE MOMENT IN TIME.*

AND *BETWEEN* THOSE FROZEN MOMENTS -- BETWEEN THE PANELS -- OUR MINDS FILL IN THE *INTERVENING MOMENTS,* CREATING THE ILLUSION OF *TIME AND MOTION.*
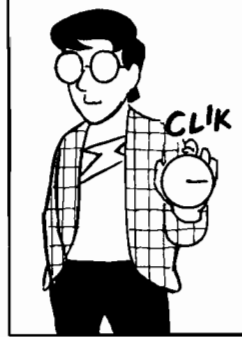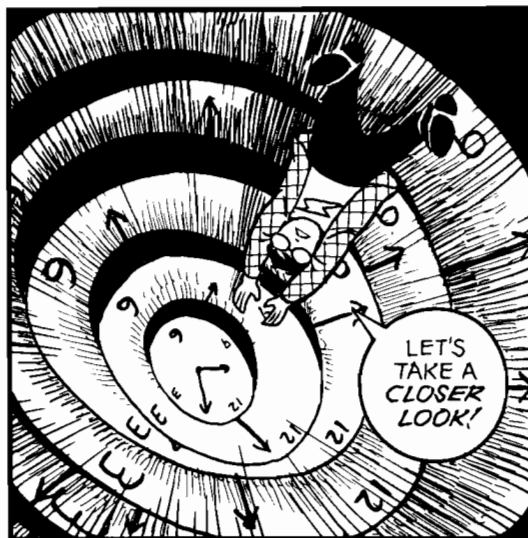
TIK TIK TIK TIK

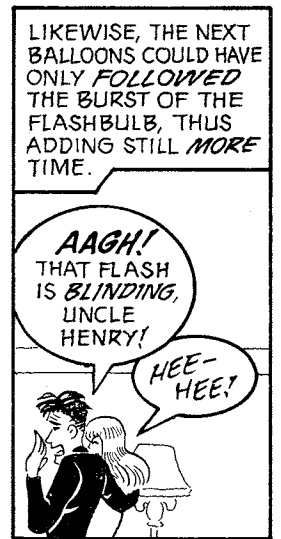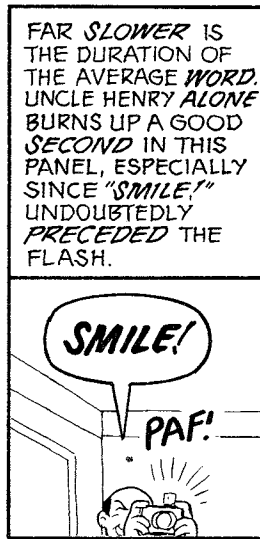LIKE A LINE DRAWN BETWEEN TWO POINTS.
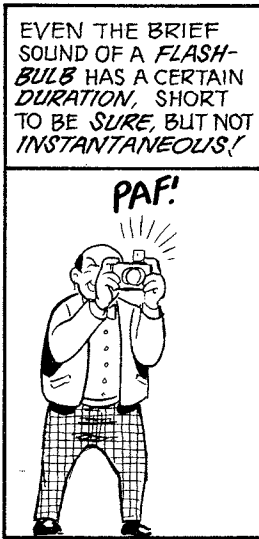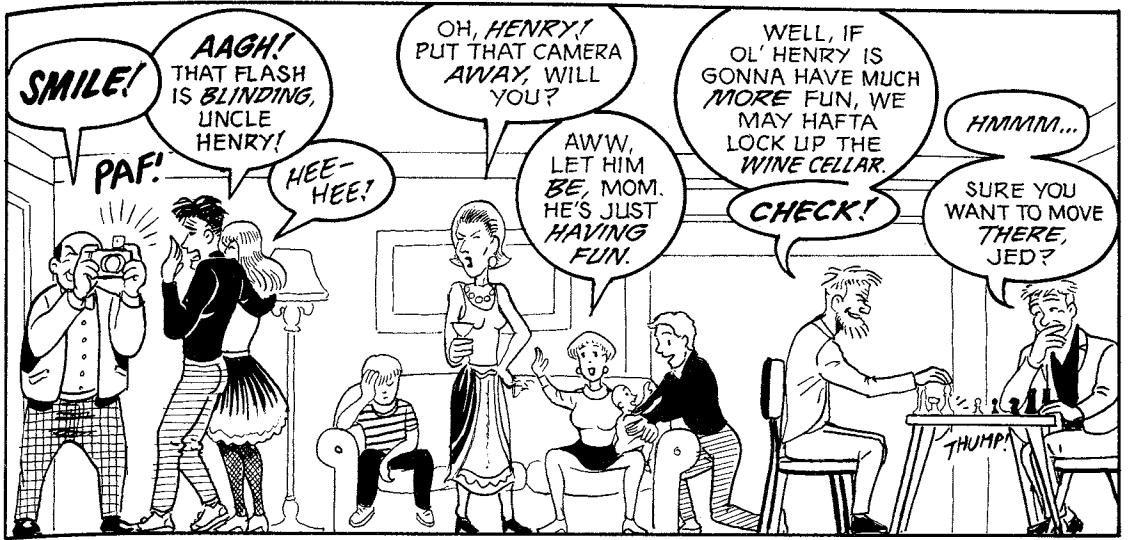
RIGHT?

CLIK

NAAH! OF *COURSE* NOT!

TIME IN COMICS IS *INFINITELY* WEIRDER THAN *THAT!*

LET'S TAKE A *CLOSER* LOOK!

Panel 1 (top wide panel):

SMILE!

PAF!

AAGH! THAT FLASH IS *BLINDING,* UNCLE HENRY!

HEE-HEE!

OH, *HENRY!* PUT THAT CAMERA *AWAY,* WILL YOU?

AWW, LET HIM *BE,* MOM. HE'S JUST *HAVING FUN.*

WELL, IF OL' HENRY IS GONNA HAVE MUCH *MORE* FUN, WE MAY HAFTA LOCK UP THE *WINE CELLAR.*

CHECK!

HMMM...

SURE YOU WANT TO MOVE *THERE,* JED?

THUMP!

Panel 2:

SINGLE MOMENT?

HARDLY!

WHIRRRRRR

Panel 3:

EVEN THE BRIEF SOUND OF A *FLASHBULB* HAS A CERTAIN *DURATION,* SHORT TO BE *SURE,* BUT NOT *INSTANTANEOUS!*

PAF!

Panel 4:

FAR *SLOWER* IS THE DURATION OF THE AVERAGE *WORD.* UNCLE HENRY *ALONE* BURNS UP A GOOD *SECOND* IN THIS PANEL, ESPECIALLY SINCE "*SMILE!*" UNDOUBTEDLY *PRECEDED* THE FLASH.

SMILE!

PAF!

Panel 5:

LIKEWISE, THE NEXT BALLOONS COULD HAVE ONLY *FOLLOWED* THE BURST OF THE FLASHBULB, THUS ADDING STILL *MORE* TIME.
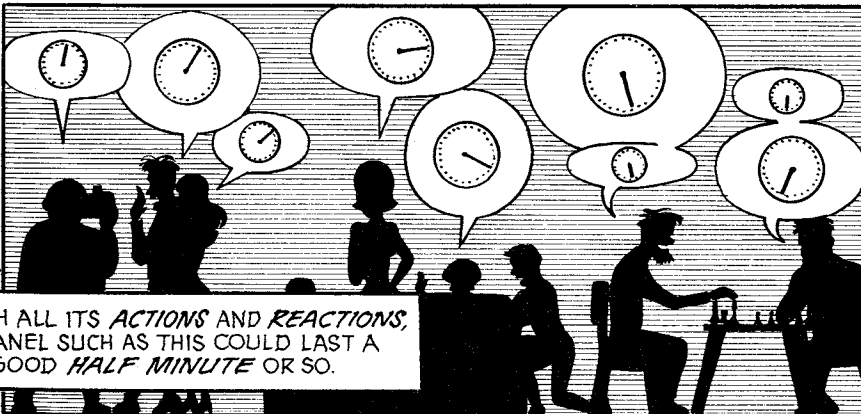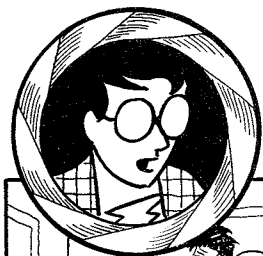
AAGH! THAT FLASH IS *BLINDING,* UNCLE HENRY!

HEE-HEE!

Panel 6 (bottom):

JUST AS PICTURES AND THE INTERVALS *BETWEEN* THEM CREATE THE ILLUSION OF TIME THROUGH *CLOSURE,* **WORDS** INTRODUCE TIME BY REPRESENTING THAT WHICH CAN ONLY EXIST *IN* TIME -- *SOUND.*
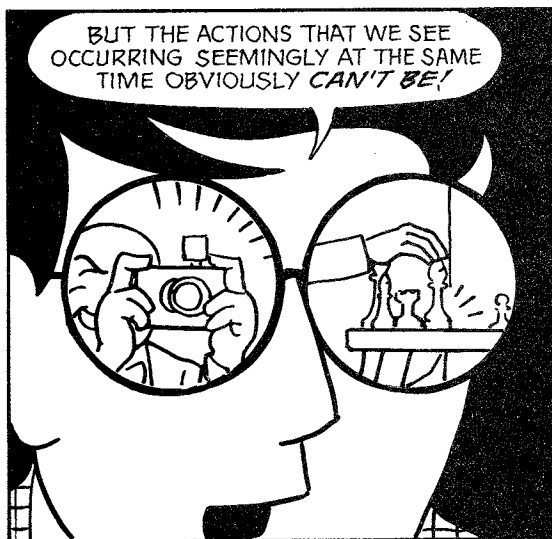
WITH ALL ITS *ACTIONS* AND *REACTIONS,* A PANEL SUCH AS THIS COULD LAST A GOOD *HALF MINUTE* OR SO.

BUT HOW *COULD* THIS BE ANYTHING BUT A *SINGLE MOMENT?* OUR EYES HAVE BEEN *WELL-TRAINED* BY THE *PHOTOGRAPH* AND BY *REPRESENTATIONAL ART* TO SEE ANY SINGLE CONTINUOUS IMAGE AS A *SINGLE INSTANT IN TIME.*
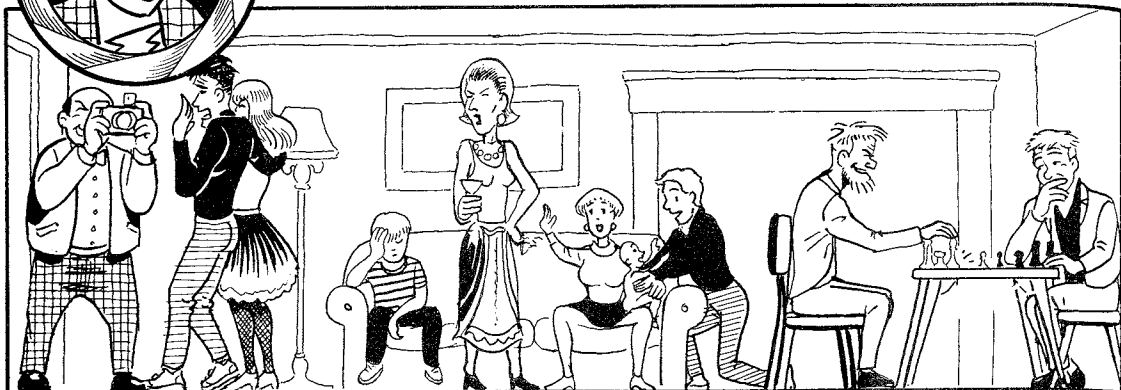
BUT THE ACTIONS THAT WE SEE OCCURRING SEEMINGLY AT THE SAME TIME OBVIOUSLY *CAN'T BE!*

ANOTHER WAY TO LOOK AT IT: LET'S THINK OF TIME AS A *ROPE.*

EACH INCH REPRESENTS A *SECOND.*

SUCH A ROPE MIGHT BE SAID TO WIND SOMETHING LIKE *THIS* THROUGH OUR PANEL.

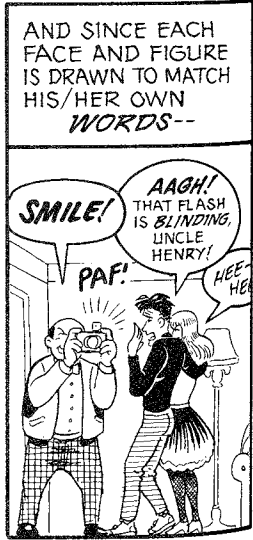*SIMPLIFIED* OF COURSE, SINCE EACH BALLOON HAS ITS OWN *TWISTS AND TURNS.*

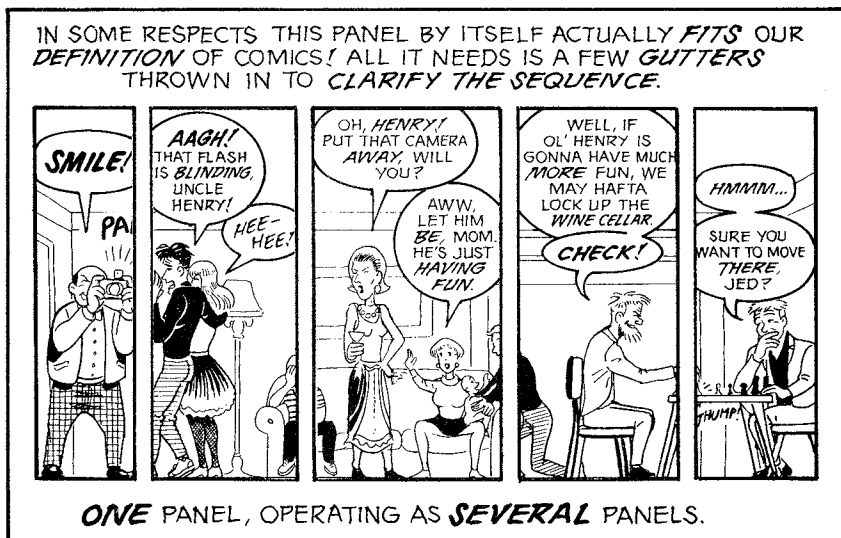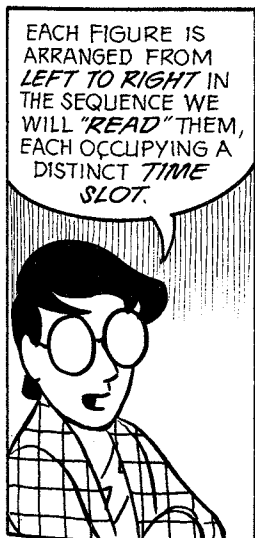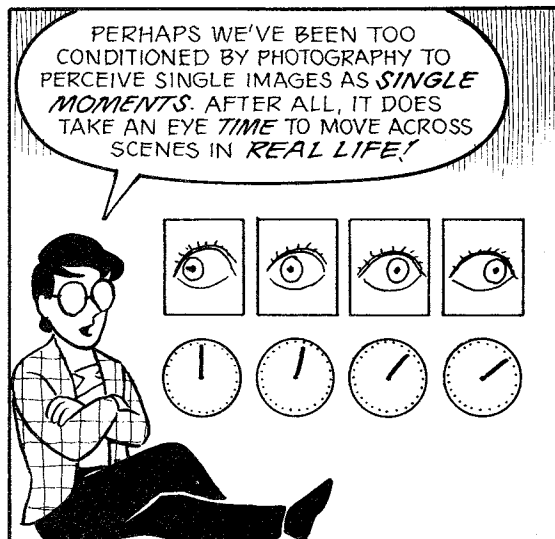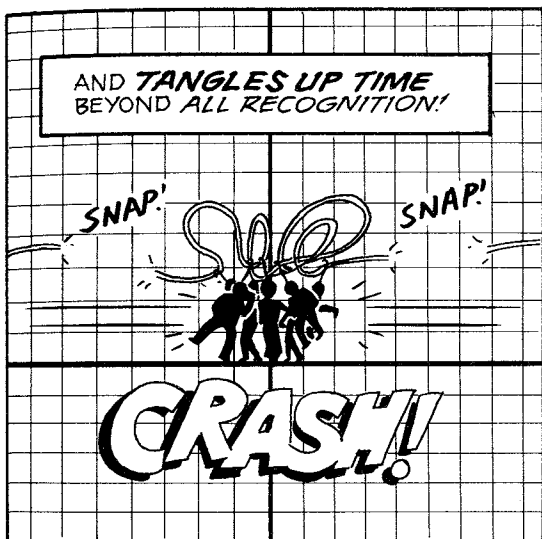AND SINCE EACH FACE AND FIGURE IS DRAWN TO MATCH HIS/HER OWN *WORDS*--

SMILE!

PAF!

AAGH! THAT FLASH IS *BLINDING,* UNCLE HENRY!

HEE HE!

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--THOSE FIGURES, FACES AND WORDS ARE MATCHED IN *TIME* AS WELL.

THE PROPERTIES OF THE SINGLE CONTINUOUS *IMAGE*, MEANWHILE, TEND TO MATCH EACH FIGURE WITH EVERY *OTHER* FIGURE.

SINGLE *IMAGE.*

SINGLE *MOMENT.*

PORTRAYING TIME ON A LINE MOVING *LEFT TO RIGHT,* THIS PUTS ALL THE *IMAGES* ON THE SAME VERTICAL AXIS.

AND *TANGLES UP TIME* BEYOND *ALL RECOGNITION!*

SNAP!

SNAP!

CRASH!

PERHAPS WE'VE BEEN TOO CONDITIONED BY PHOTOGRAPHY TO PERCEIVE SINGLE IMAGES AS *SINGLE MOMENTS.* AFTER ALL, IT DOES TAKE AN EYE *TIME* TO MOVE ACROSS SCENES IN *REAL LIFE!*

EACH FIGURE IS ARRANGED FROM *LEFT TO RIGHT* IN THE SEQUENCE WE WILL *"READ"* THEM, EACH OCCUPYING A DISTINCT *TIME SLOT.*

IN SOME RESPECTS THIS PANEL BY ITSELF ACTUALLY *FITS* OUR *DEFINITION* OF COMICS! ALL IT NEEDS IS A FEW *GUTTERS* THROWN IN TO *CLARIFY THE SEQUENCE.*
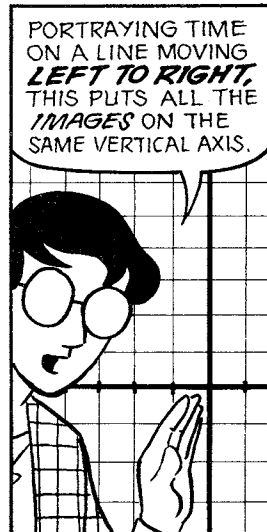
SMILE!

PA

AAGH! THAT FLASH IS *BLINDING,* UNCLE HENRY!

HEE-HEE!

OH, *HENRY!* PUT THAT CAMERA *AWAY,* WILL YOU?

AWW, LET HIM *BE,* MOM. HE'S JUST *HAVING FUN.*

WELL, IF OL' HENRY IS GONNA HAVE MUCH *MORE* FUN, WE MAY HAFTA LOCK UP THE *WINE CELLAR.*

CHECK!

HMMM...

SURE YOU WANT TO MOVE *THERE,* JED?

THUMP!

ONE PANEL, OPERATING AS *SEVERAL* PANELS.
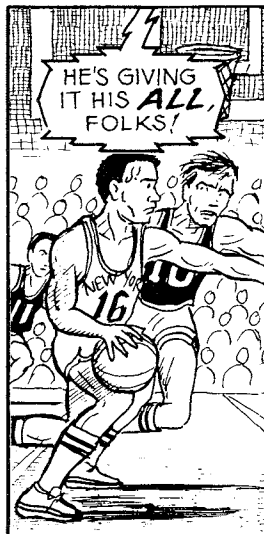
NOT *ALL* PANELS ARE LIKE THAT, OF COURSE.

A SILENT PANEL SUCH AS THIS COULD *INDEED* BE SAID TO DEPICT A *SINGLE MOMENT!*
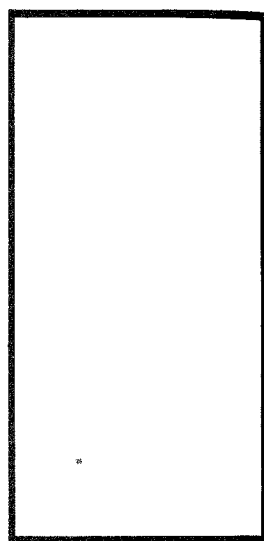
HE'S GIVING IT HIS *ALL,* FOLKS!

IF *SOUND* IS INTRODUCED, THIS CEASES TO BE TRUE--

--*BUT,* IN AN OTHERWISE SILENT *CAPTIONED* PANEL, THE SINGLE MOMENT CAN ACTUALLY BE *HELD.*

HE WAS GIVING IT HIS *ALL,* WHEN--
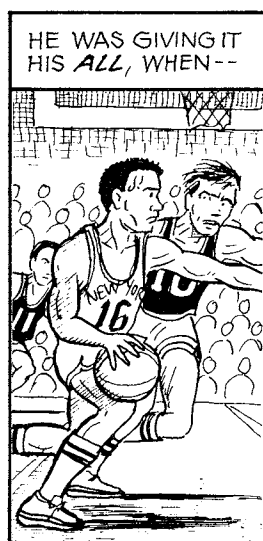
THESE VARIOUS SHAPES WE CALL *PANELS* HOLD IN THEIR BORDERS ALL OF THE ICONS THAT ADD UP TO THE *VOCABULARY OF COMICS.*

ALL EXCEPT *ONE.*

FOR JUST AS THE BODY'S LARGEST ORGAN --OUR *SKIN*-- IS SELDOM *THOUGHT OF* AS AN ORGAN--

--SO TOO IS THE PANEL *ITSELF* OVERLOOKED AS COMICS' MOST IMPORTANT *ICON!*

THESE ICONS WE CALL PANELS OR "FRAMES" HAVE NO *FIXED* OR *ABSOLUTE MEANING,* LIKE THE ICONS OF *LANGUAGE, SCIENCE* AND *COMMUNICATION.*

NOR IS THEIR MEANING AS *FLUID* AND *MALLEABLE* AS THE SORTS OF ICONS WE CALL *PICTURES.*

THE PANEL ACTS AS A SORT OF *GENERAL INDICATOR* THAT *TIME* OR *SPACE* IS BEING *DIVIDED.*
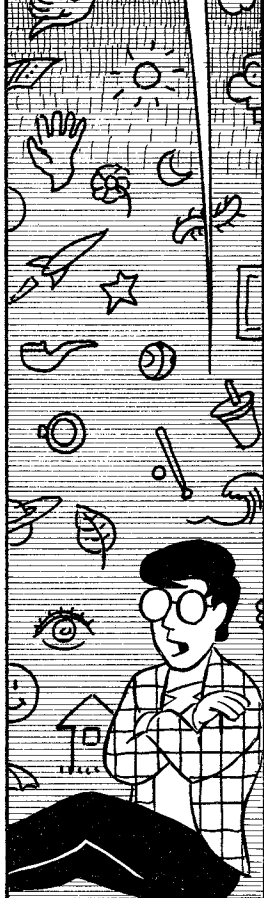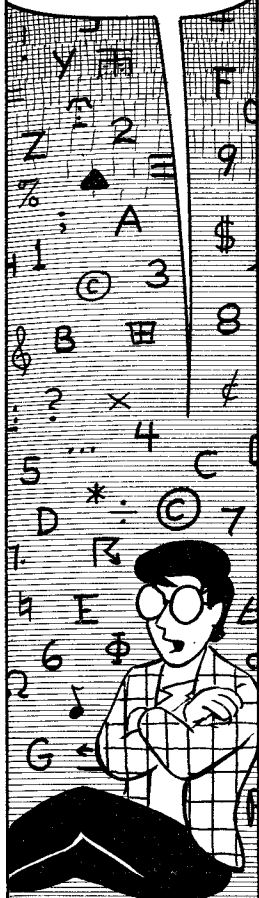
THE *DURATIONS* OF THAT *TIME* AND THE *DIMENSIONS* OF THAT *SPACE* ARE DEFINED MORE BY THE *CONTENTS* OF THE PANEL THAN BY THE PANEL *ITSELF.* *

HE'S GIVING IT HIS *ALL,* FOLKS!

HE WAS GIVING IT HIS *ALL,* WHEN--

PANEL *SHAPES* VARY *CONSIDERABLY* THOUGH, AND WHILE DIFFERENCES OF SHAPE DON'T AFFECT THE SPECIFIC *"MEANINGS"* OF THOSE PANELS VIS-A-VIS TIME, THEY *CAN* AFFECT THE READING *EXPERIENCE.*

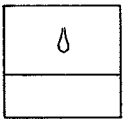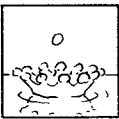WHICH BRINGS US TO THE STRANGE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TIME AS *DEPICTED* IN COMICS AND TIME AS *PERCEIVED* BY THE READER.
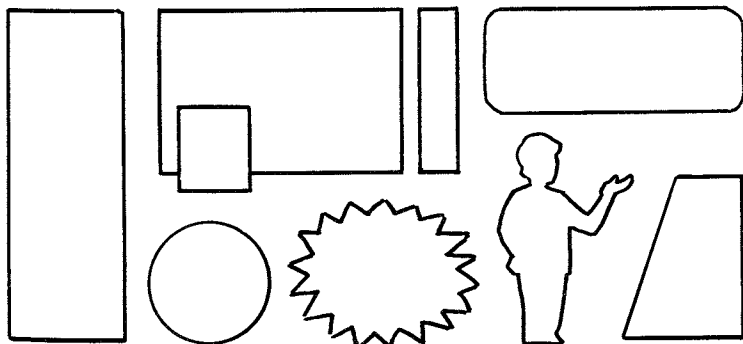
*EISNER DISCUSSES THIS UNDER THE HEADING "FRAMING TIME" IN COMICS AND SEQUENTIAL ART.

IN LEARNING TO READ COMICS WE ALL LEARNED TO PERCEIVE TIME *SPATIALLY,* FOR IN THE WORLD OF COMICS, *TIME AND SPACE ARE ONE AND THE SAME.*
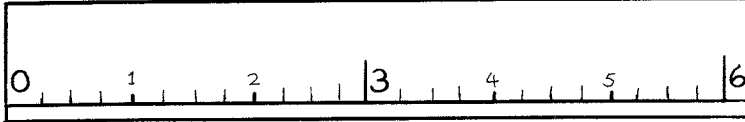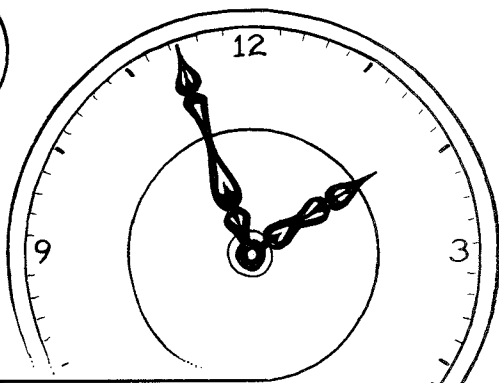
THE PROBLEM IS *THERE'S NO CONVERSION CHART!*

THE FEW CENTIMETERS WHICH TRANSPORT US FROM *SECOND TO SECOND* IN *ONE* SEQUENCE COULD TAKE US A *HUNDRED MILLION YEARS* IN *ANOTHER.*

SALE

SO, AS *READERS,* WE'RE LEFT WITH ONLY A *VAGUE SENSE* THAT AS OUR EYES ARE MOVING THROUGH *SPACE,* THEY'RE ALSO MOVING THROUGH *TIME* -- WE JUST DON'T KNOW BY *HOW MUCH!*

IN MOST CASES IT'S NOT HARD TO MAKE AN EDUCATED GUESS AS TO THE DURATION OF A GIVEN SEQUENCE, SO LONG AS THE *ELEMENTS* OF THAT SEQUENCE ARE *FAMILIAR* TO US.

I ALWAYS FIGURED MARY-ANNE WOULD GO FOR GILLIGAN.

I GUESS.

FROM A *LIFETIME OF CONVERSATIONS,* WE CAN BE SURE THAT A *"PAUSE"* PANEL LIKE THIS LASTS FOR NO MORE THAN SEVERAL *SECONDS.*

BUT IF THE CREATOR OF THIS SCENE WANTED TO *LENGTHEN* THAT PAUSE, HOW COULD HE OR SHE DO SO? ONE OBVIOUS SOLUTION WOULD BE TO ADD MORE PANELS, BUT IS THAT THE ONLY WAY?

D'YA THINK THE SOX COULD FINALLY DO IT THIS YEAR?

I GUESS.

IS THERE ANY WAY TO MAKE A SINGLE SILENT PANEL LIKE THIS ONE SEEM *LONGER?* HOW ABOUT WIDENING THE SPACE *BETWEEN PANELS?* ANY *DIFFERENCE?*
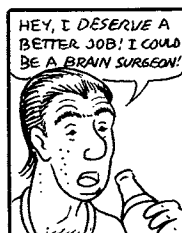
WE'VE SEEN HOW TIME CAN BE CONTROLLED THROUGH THE *CONTENT* OF PANELS, THE *NUMBER* OF PANELS AND CLOSURE *BETWEEN* PANELS, BUT THERE'S STILL *ONE MORE.*

HEY, I DESERVE A BETTER JOB! I COULD BE A BRAIN SURGEON!

I GUESS.

AS UNLIKELY AS IT SOUNDS, THE PANEL *SHAPE* CAN ACTUALLY MAKE A *DIFFERENCE* IN OUR *PERCEPTION* OF TIME. EVEN THOUGH THIS LONG PANEL HAS THE SAME BASIC "MEANING" AS ITS SHORTER VERSIONS, STILL IT HAS THE *FEELING* OF GREATER LENGTH!

THAT *MADONNA*, MAN, SHE'S ONE *HOT* BABE!

I GUESS.

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EVER NOTICED HOW THE WORDS "*SHORT*" OR "*LONG*" CAN REFER EITHER TO THE *FIRST* DIMENSION OR TO THE *FOURTH?*

IN A MEDIUM WHERE TIME AND SPACE *MERGE* SO *COMPLETELY*, THE DISTINCTION OFTEN *VANISHES!*

THE *PANEL BORDER* IS OUR *GUIDE* THROUGH *TIME AND SPACE*, BUT IT WILL ONLY GUIDE US *SO FAR.*

AS MENTIONED, PANELS COME IN MANY SHAPES AND SIZES, THOUGH THE *CLASSIC RECTANGLE* IS USED MOST *OFTEN.*

MOST OF US ARE SO USED TO THE STANDARD *RECTANGULAR* FORMAT THAT A "*BORDERLESS*" PANEL SUCH AS THIS CAN TAKE ON A *TIMELESS QUALITY.*

HEY, ARE YOU EVEN *LISTENING* TO ME?!

I GUESS.

WHEN THE *CONTENT* OF A SILENT PANEL OFFERS NO CLUES AS TO ITS *DURATION,* IT CAN ALSO PRODUCE A SENSE OF *TIMELESSNESS.*

BECAUSE OF ITS *UNRESOLVED NATURE,* SUCH A PANEL MAY *LINGER* IN THE READER'S MIND.

AND ITS PRESENCE MAY BE FELT IN THE PANELS WHICH *FOLLOW* IT.

WHEN *"BLEEDS"* ARE USED -- I.E., WHEN A PANEL RUNS OFF THE EDGE OF THE *PAGE* -- THIS EFFECT IS *COMPOUNDED.*

TIME IS NO LONGER CONTAINED BY THE FAMILIAR ICON OF THE *CLOSED PANEL,* BUT INSTEAD *HEMORRHAGES* AND ESCAPES INTO *TIMELESS SPACE.*

SUCH IMAGES CAN *SET THE MOOD* OR A *SENSE OF PLACE* FOR *WHOLE SCENES* THROUGH THEIR *LINGERING TIMELESS PRESENCE.*

ONCE AGAIN, THIS IS A TECHNIQUE USED MOST OFTEN IN JAPAN AND ONLY RECENTLY ADOPTED HERE IN THE WEST.